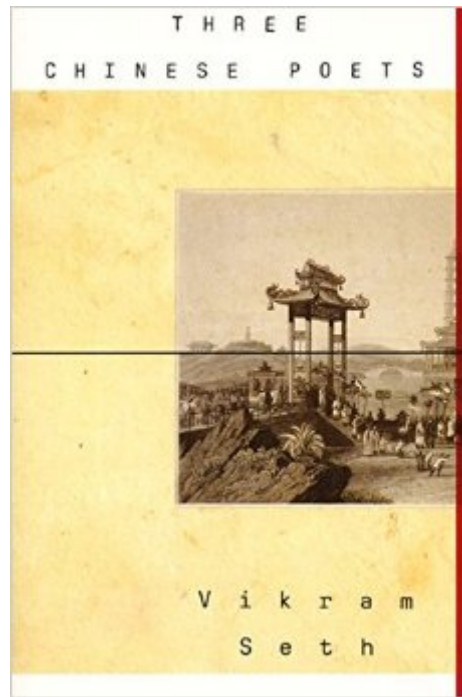


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Three Chinese Poets



Synopsis

The three T'ang dynasty poets translated here are among the greatest literary figures of China, or indeed the world. Responding differently to their common times, Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu crystallize the immense variety of China and the Chinese poetic tradition and, across a distance of twelve hundred years, move the reader as it is rare for even poetry to do.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I think there is no task more daunting for a writer than to translate poetry from ancient China. First of all, the poems consist of ideograms, the so-called "characters". Vikram Seth's introduction to his book "Three Chinese Poets" has a good example how a Chinese poem looks in the original characters and in pinyin translation, and how a literal, word-by-word translation would sound: "lonely, close, brushwood, door/ vast, face, falling, light/ cranes, nest, pine, tree, everywhere/ men, visit, wicker, gate, few/ tender, bamboo, hold, new, powder/ red, lotus, shed, old, clothes/ at the ford, lantern, fire, rise/ everywhere, water-chestnut, picker, return home." The freedom given by the lack of grammar stands in stark contrast to the rigid structure of the poem. It consists of eight lines with five Chinese characters in each line. The lines 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8 end with rhyme words. Lines 3 and 4 have an identical grammatical word order, as have lines 5 and 6. Also, the images of the poet are symmetrically arranged. In line 1 a closed door stands in contrast to the vast expanse of line 2; line 3 sets the cranes everywhere in contrast to the few visitors of line 4; line 5 sees new powder against the old clothes of line 6. Only lines 7 and 8 do not contain contrasting images but rather an evening scene that reflects the evening scene of lines 1 and 2. Within this finely crafted structure the poet expresses a feeling: loneliness. A translator has two options: to stay true to the Chinese characters

and the structure of the original poem, or to stay true to what he feels to be the poetic message of the poem. It is essentially the same problem that a piano player faces when interpreting a sonata by Mozart or Beethoven. Seth chooses the conservative path of staying very close to the original, as he explains in his enjoyable introduction: "I should mention that the poems in this book are not intended as transcreations or free translations, in this sense, attempts to use the originals as trampolines from which to bounce off on to poems of my own [great image, by the way, for the arrogance of some translators]. The famous translations of Ezra Pound, compounded as they are of ignorance of Chinese and valiant self-indulgence, have remained before me as a warning of what to shun. I have preferred mentors who ... admit the primacy of the original and attempt fidelity to it." Fidelity, however, is not all it takes to make a translation succeed. Sometimes the much lamented and maligned "freedom" of a translation yields better results. This is the case here. Let me compare two translations of a poem called "Moonlit Night" by the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712 - 770 AD) to illustrate my point. Seth translates: "In Fuzhou, far away, my wife is watching/
The moon alone tonight, and my thoughts fill/
With sadness for my children, who can't think/
Of me here in Changan; they're too young still./
Her cloud-soft hair is moist with fragrant mist./
In the clear light her white arms sense the chill./
When will we feel the moonlight dry our tears,/
Leaning together on our window-sill?" For comparison, here the "transcreation" by David Young from his book "Five Tang Poets" (1990): "Tonight/ in this same moonlight/ my wife is alone at her window// I can hardly bear to think of my children/too young to understand/ why I can't come home to them// her hair must be damp from the mist/ her arms cold jade in the moonlight// when will we stand together/ by those slack curtains/ while the moonlight/ dries the tear-streaks/ on our faces?" Seth's translation keeps the eight-line structure and the rhyme words in lines 2, 4, 6 and 8. He does not give a pinyin (character-by-character) translation of the original poem. Therefore I cannot judge how true to the original his choice of words is. I would assume Young takes more freedom with the words. Young also breaks up the 8-line structure of the poem into a 3-3-2-5-line structure. In doing so he tries to highlight the train of thought of Du Fu: wife, children, beauty of wife, yearning for reunion. The success of Young's translation lies in his bringing out the pain and longing of the poet who is separated from wife and children. This is where Seth fails. How pale is the pain of separation in "and my thoughts fill with sadness for my children" in comparison to "I can hardly bear to think of my children"; and how old-fashioned does it sound to end a poem with "leaning together on our window-sill" rather than with the poignant "while the moonlight dries the tear-streaks on our faces". The best ancient Chinese poems pack a tremendous amount of emotion into a tight and formal structure. In this they can be compared to Shakespeare's sonnets. These Chinese poets are

no lesser poets than Shakespeare is. Translating their poems, the success of the translation must be measured by the extent to which the emotion can be released without destroying the sense of structure in the original poem. Seth's translations with their stress on formal structure and literalness stifle the full emotional impact. The translations focus on the original structure rather than the truth about the human condition that the poet wants to convey to the reader. This is where Young's freer translation yields much better results. The only objection one might raise against Young's translation is that it is reminiscent of a modern poet like William Carlos Williams. But I'd rather have Du Fu's substance in a modern structure than Du Fu's admirable craftsmanship at the expense of the impact his words have on my heart. His emotions are timeless - let them shine through with the help of a little "transcreation".

I picked this book primarily because after reading both verse and prose from the author, I know the translation would make a great reading. It did. I liked the poetry, the ideas, and whatever Chinese poets must have thought about was communicated as well as possible in well-compiled text. I cannot read or understand Chinese, but my Chinese friends found the translations to be inadequate and half-hearted representations of what they described as timeless, classic poetry. Knowing the difficulty in faithfully representing a different culture for an author, and the complexity of translation of any verse, cultures, times and metaphors, I think Vikram Seth as always did a commendable job. For real taste of his poetic genius, read *The Golden Gate* or *All you who sleep tonight!*

Vikram Seth is a literary giant and Renaissance Man of international renown. "Three Chinese Poets" is yet more evidence of his versatility as a man of the written word. Being fluent in a few languages, I appreciate the meticulous care and sensitivity that Seth shows in his translated works. His understanding of semantics, sensitivity to literary atmosphere, and respect for originality carries through. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!!! :)

A delightful little book.

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